



# Echo and Narcissus

On Ovid and his influence

# A summary of Ovid's version (Met. Book III)



- ▶ Sometimes the Nymph Echo would distract and amuse Juno with long and entertaining stories, while Jupiter pursued the other mountain nymphs. When Juno discovered the trickery she punished the talkative Echo by taking away her voice, except in foolish repetition of another's shouted words. Thus, all Echo could do was repeat the voice of another.
- ▶ Echo fell in love with a vain youth named Narcissus, who was the son of the blue Nymph Liriope. The River god Cephisus had once encircled Liriope with the windings of his streams, and thus trapping her, had seduced the nymph. Narcissus was their child.
- ▶ Concerned about the baby's welfare, Liriope went to consult the oracle called Teiresias regarding her son's future. Teiresias told the nymph that Narcissus "would live to a ripe old age, as long as he never knew himself."
- ▶ Narcissus was beautiful as a child and grew even more so as he matured. By the age of sixteen he had left a trail of broken hearts, from rejected lovers of both sexes.
- ▶ One day when Narcissus was out hunting, Echo stealthily followed the handsome youth through the woods, longing to address him but unable to speak first. When Narcissus finally heard footsteps and shouted "Who's there?", Echo answered "Who's there?" And so it went, until finally Echo showed herself and rushed to embrace the lovely youth.
- ▶ He pulled away from the nymph and rejected her. Narcissus left Echo heartbroken and she retreated to lonely mountain caves, pining away for the love she never knew, until only her voice remained.



- One of Narcissus' rejected suitors beseeched the gods to punish the vain Narcissus.
- Nemesis heard the plea and made Narcissus fall in love, but a kind of love that couldn't be fulfilled. Narcissus came upon a clear spring and, as he bent low to take a drink, for the first time caught sight of himself reflected in the pool. Try as he might to touch this exquisite person in the waters, however, he never could.
- For hours he sat enraptured by the spring, at last recognizing himself but tortured by the realization that he could never possess the object of his infatuation. Narcissus was tormented, much as he had tormented all those who in the past had been unlucky enough to fall in love with him.
- Narcissus wasted away by the pool, until nothing was left of his body but the narcissus flower, and when he died Echo sang his lament.



## What are the interesting features of this myth?

- ▶ Think particularly about similarities between the two characters and their fates.
- ▶ Look, too, at speech and speechlessness; this is one of the most complex episodes involving speech in the *Metamorphoses*.

# Here are some earlier sources...



- ▶ A variant Greek legend excludes Echo, and culminates in Narcissus' suicide. This tale, authored around 50 BC, perhaps by Parthenius of Nicaea (who was Virgil's tutor) is written on a recently translated [papyrus](#) discovered at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt. The same bloody, pre-Ovidian account of Narcissus is given by Conon (late 1st century BC), an obscure Greek mythographer who in his "Narratives" (Diegeseis), tells of Narcissus and his rejected lover Ameinias:

Ameinias was very adamant and needy. Since he was not desired in return he took a sword and killed himself before the doors of Narcissus, praying earnestly for the god to avenge him. Accordingly, Narcissus when he saw his appearance and beauty in a stream fell adamantly in love with himself. Finally being at a loss and believing that he had suffered justly in return for how he had humiliated him [Ameinias], he killed himself.



- ▶ **Homeric Hymn 19 to Pan 1 ff (trans. Evelyn-White) (Greek epic C7th to 4th B.C.) :**  
"At evening, as he [Pan] returns from the chase, he sounds his note, playing sweet and low on his pipes of reed . . . At that hour the clear-voiced Nymphai are with him and move with nimble feet, singing by some spring of dark water, while Echo wails about the mountain-top."
- ▶ **Pindar, Olympian Ode 14. 20 ff (trans. Conway) (Greek lyric C5th B.C.) :**  
"Then let Echo speed to Persephone's dark-walled dwelling [i.e. through the caverns of the earth], to his [deceased] father Kleodemos bearing the glorious tidings."
- ▶ **Aristophanes, Thesmophoriazusae 970 (trans. O'Neill) (Greek comedy C5th to 4th B.C.) :**  
"Bakkhos [Dionysos], who delightest to mingle with the dear choruses of the Nymphai Oreiai (Mountain Nymphs), and who repeatest, while dancing with them, the sacred hymn, *Euios, Euios, Euoi!* Echo, the Nymph of Cithaeron, returns thy words, which resound beneath the dark vaults of the thick foliage and in the midst of the rocks of the forest; the ivy enlaces thy brow with its tendrils charged with flowers."
- ▶ **Aristophanes, Thesmophoriazusae 1020 ff :**  
"Echo, thou who reignest in the inmost recesses of the caves."
- ▶ **Aristophanes, Thesmophoriazusae 1060 ff :**  
"I am Echo, the Nymph who repeats all she hears."



# A new relationship?



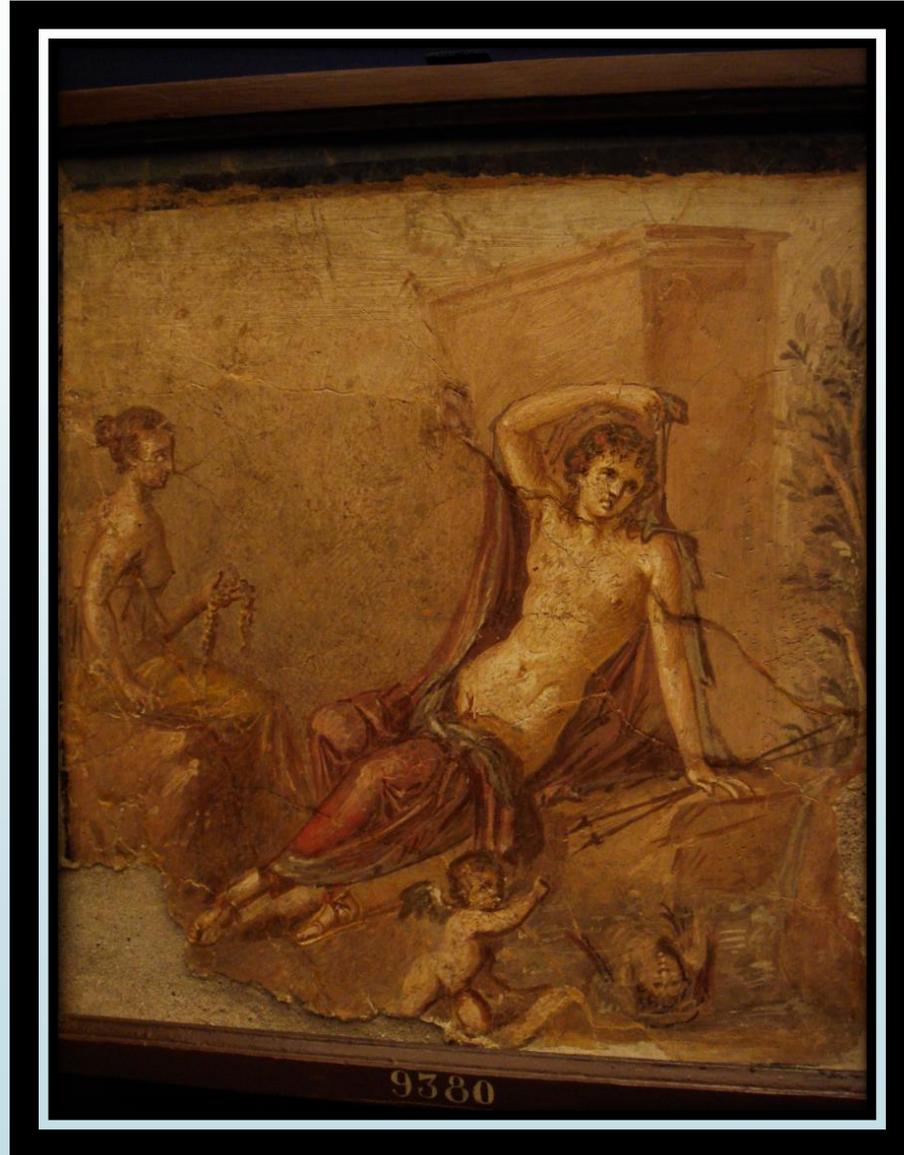
- ▶ While the character of Echo had a long history (often associated with Pan), and Narcissus had his own myth, the combination of the two seems to have been an invention of Ovid.
- ▶ Why do you think Ovid might have invented a relationship between them?
- ▶ How does Ovid make the combination of these two characters striking?



# Echo and Narcissus in Later Art

How has each artist responded to Ovid's story?

# From Pompeii...



Carravaggio, 1598.  
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome.



Nicolas Poussin, 1628-30.  
Louvre, Paris.



J.W. Waterhouse, 1903.  
Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.



"Metamorphosis of Narcissus", Salvador Dali, 1937.  
Tate Modern, London.





- ▶ In some time periods the focus is on the tragedy of unrequited love, with paintings typically including both characters (eg. the Pompeii painting), while at other times the self-obsession of Narcissus dominates the artistic representations to the exclusion of Echo (Caravaggio). Sometimes the focus is on Arcadia and the idealised classical culture (Poussin), while at other times sexuality dominates (Waterhouse).
  
- ▶ Narcissus can stand for:
  - ▶ **the artist** (obsessed with the surface of the canvas and the reflection of himself that can be seen within),
  - ▶ **the doomed lover** (self-obsessed and arrogant),
  - ▶ **the homosexual lover** (in love with someone who is almost but not quite himself)
  - ▶ or the **victim of obsession** (pursued, much like Hippolytus, despite his lack of interest).

The role of Echo in the painting often helps to position Narcissus.



## In conclusion...

- ▶ It seems that Ovid may have been the first to combine the characters of Echo and Narcissus in a single myth, but he was by no means the last – the relationship between them has been used by artists and writers, philosophers and psychologists ever since. Even the *absence* of a relationship is significant.
- ▶ However, perhaps the most influential aspect of Ovid's version is the understanding of human nature it reveals. Its popularity in early psychoanalysis demonstrates how relevant it still is.